The Role of Extreme Sports in lifestyle enhancement and wellness.

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Alternative sports are fast becoming the physical activity of choice. Participation rates are even outstripping more traditional activities such as golf. At their most extreme there is no second chance, the most likely outcome of a mismanaged error or accident is death. At this level participants enjoy activities such as B.A.S.E. (Buildings, Antennae, Space, Earth) jumping, big wave surfing, waterfall kayaking, extreme skiing, rope-free climbing and extreme mountaineering. Probably the most common explanation for participation in extreme sports is the notion that participation is just a matter of some people's need to take unnecessary risks. This study reports on findings that indicate a more positive experience. A phenomenological method was used via unstructured interviews with 15 extreme sports participants (ages 30 – 72 years) and other firsthand accounts. Extreme sport participants directly related their experience to personal transformations that spill over to life in general. Athletes report feelings of deep psychological wellbeing and meaningfulness. The extreme sport experience enables a participant to break through personal barriers and develop an understanding of their own resourcefulness and emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual capabilities. Furthermore such a breakthrough also seems to trigger a change in personal philosophy or view on life. The extreme sport experience transforms a participant though not in terms of working towards an external (social or cultural) perception of identity or towards some constructed perception of an ideal self, but by touching something within.

Extreme sports are enjoying incredible popularity whilst more traditional sports 'struggle to retain members' (Pain & Pain, 2005, S33). Over the past two decades, participation rates in these sports have grown exponentially. Between 1998 and 2001 participation rates in extreme sports far outstripped any other sporting activity (American Sports Data, 2002). According to Puchan (2004) involvement has:

> been shown not to be just a 'flash in the pan' but a sign of the times in which people are looking for a new way to define their lives and to escape from an increasingly regulated and sanitised way of living (Puchan, 2004, P. 177).

In extreme sports there is no second chance, the most likely outcome of a mismanaged error or accident is death (Brymer, 2005, 2009; Brymer & Oades, 2009). Typically, participation is considered to be about crazy people taking unnecessary risks, why else would someone willingly undertake a leisure activity where death is a real potential? Where theories such as sensation seeking (Rossi & Cereatti, 1993; Zuckerman, 2000) have been employed to provide explanations. However, there may be more to it. This paper explores the reality that participation actually results in positive psychological changes. Further the experience of those who participate point to a clearer understanding of certain positive constructs: 'There is a Mystery Zone out there, beyond the edge of the human world, in the back country, the empty skies and waters of the planet' (Schultheis, 1996, foreword).

Researchers have linked stress most likely in the form of trauma, tragedy or death to dramatic positive life changes (Emmons, 1999; Maslow, 1977). Continued inducements of such experiences enhances a person's sense of well-being (Maslow, 1996). Interestingly, after Maslow's heart attack in 1968 he reportedly admitted that his whole life was positively transformed as he had now experienced a death of sorts. This experience removed the fear and triggered his desire to live every moment of

everyday. Wong (1998, 2000) echoed such determinations and persuasively argued that by facing our own fear of death and death itself we become fully self-aware, life takes on a new, profound and positive meaning.

As the intensity of the event increases so to does the resulting transformation. For the resulting factors to be positive, the participants would need to expect and have a measure of control over the event (Emmons, 1999).

Those studying transpersonal experiences have also found intense personal transformations. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) describe 'quantum' changes or epiphanies and found that the personal characteristics resulting from such changes include humility, spirituality, personal growth and self-esteem. Braud (2001) recognised that certain experiences induce 'other forms of consciousness, and a MORE that is both beyond and within us' (Braud, 2001, p. 1). Such a MORE is rarely realised but is manifest as a better part of a person that is more deeply in touch with the external world and a person's own potential (James, 1971; Oatley & Djikic, 2002). Such experiences are considered 'white crows;' rare but real (Braud, 2001). Rhea White (1993; 1988) categorised a number of 'exceptional human experiences' that trigger profound transformations through the transcendence of a previous self. Grof (1979, 1985, 1988) also observed experiences that elicit deep transformation of personal understandings and the realisation of such a 'MORE.'

Philosophical writings from Buddhist, Hindu and Toaist traditions all note the potential of deep transformations that manifests themselves as core personality or life world changes (Hanna, 1993; Mohanty, 1972; Spiegelberg, 1982; Zaner, 1970; Zimmerman, 1986). Schulthies (1996) focussed on the similarities between what he experienced and certain descriptions presented by Zen and other traditions. He found

that in many traditions transcendence and transformations are deliberately sought by approaching potentially death inducing activities (Henry, 1999). Some traumatic experiences trigger ‘a profound spiritual transformation’ (Daniels, 2002, p. 25)

Certain events that bring us nearer to the experiential reality of our own deaths are positive life changing experiences (Wong, 1998). Those studying meaning and existential psychology provide some clues as to how a change in perceptions on self-identity might come about. Theorists argue that by facing death and experiencing the potential reality of our own death we learn to live fully and authentically. May (1983) stressed the importance of true death awareness in enabling a fully lived life. For Marshall (2002), this is authentic living obtained as a direct result of experiencing one’s core self. Preoccupation with external, social day-to-day living hinders our ability to find our own inner being and meaning. The end result of accepting the reality of our own death is that both the sense of who we are, and our relationship with others are enhanced (Wong, 2000).

Walsh (2000) also clearly identified the gap between conventional and authentic lives whilst emphasising the importance of authentic life. According to Walsh the seduction of living a socially determined, typical, superficial, trance-like, fearful and deficient life is all-pervasive in conventional culture. We deliberately deceive ourselves and remain trapped in inauthenticity. We are estranged from our authentic selves. To escape such a predicament, Walsh believes, a person must somehow break free from ‘the biggest cult of all, namely cult-ure’ and transcend it (Walsh, 2000, p. 7).

Heidegger in his discussion on identity argued that the authentic self is already understood by each of us but is lost in a world swamped by the experiences of relating to others (Burston, 1998). The call to look inwards removes each being from this state

of lostness. This is not an inwardly directed analytic dissection of an inner life but rather an experiential recognition. Once the call is answered, the authentic self is realised with a ‘worldly’ orientation (Heidegger, 1996, p. 253). Thus, the authentic self is summoned to live out its potential. A genuine being-towards-death enables the realisation of the authentic self. As Zimmerman understood, those who are more daring, who ‘catch the scent of death,’ who give up the struggle and let things be, reach a deeper fulfilment (Zimmerman, 1986, p. 250). Perhaps then the extreme sport experience, being one where death is experienced as real, triggers the call to authentic self and authentic living free from the chains of the external context. This authentic self is not an idealised or willed version of self as, say, a more macho, indestructible being that masters his or her environment (Greenberg, 1977). It is more than that; it is a self that is already part of each being and each being has its own authentic self. By listening to and honouring that authentic self, one is able to live one’s own authentic life.

This paper explores one aspect of a greater exploration into the phenomenology of extreme sports; the relationship between extreme sport participation and the enhancement of lifestyle and wellness. Participant experiences are discussed in relation to extreme sport participation and perspectives on self-understanding.

Method

As this paper is only part of a larger hermeneutic phenomenological exploration into the extreme sport experience this section on the methodology outlines the steps taken to explore the notion of lifestyle enhancement. The hermeneutic phenomenological perspective demands that the researcher return to the experience and explore the phenomenon through a multitude of data sources. The researcher uses interviews,

biographies, poetry, video or in fact any source that might shed light on the experience in question. The findings in this study are particularly significant because the research project did not set out to link the extreme sport experience to lifestyle enhancement or wellness.

Procedure

Data was gathered from a multitude of sources including interviews, scientific manuscripts, biographies and video from the U.K., Europe, Australia, USA, India, China and Nepal. Interview participants (10 male and 5 female, age 30 to 70 years) were all extreme sport participants, as defined earlier. All data sources were outside the age group typically discussed in the literature about youth and alternative sports. Interview participants were chosen for their availability and desire to explore the experience. The extreme sports included B.A.S.E. jumping, big wave surfing, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, extreme mountaineering and solo rope-free climbing. Participants of alternative, lifestyle or sub-culture sports that did not fit the definition as outlined above, including surfing, skiing and so on at a level where death would be rare or non-existent or sports such as skateboarding and BMX were not included. Participants were chosen for the sake of the phenomenon (Van Kaam, 1966) and for their ability to explore the experience not for their knowledge of the phenomenological framework.

Unstructured interviews with extreme sport participants were conducted face-to-face or by phone. One question guided the interview and analysis process “what is the extreme sport experience?” Or to put it another way “how is the extreme sport experience perceived by participants?”

Interview analysis was undertaken in a variety of stages. The first stage involved listening to each tape immediately after undertaking the interview (Amlani, 1998; Ettling, 1998). The second step involved transcribing the texts. The third step involved repeatedly listening to and reading individual interviews and transcripts. The fourth stage was the thematic analysis. Each individual tape/transcript was listened to, read and thematically analysed as a separate entity though all transcripts were revisited as themes became more explicit. Both formal and non-formal understandings of potential themes were continually questioned, challenged and assessed for relevancy. Questions such as; “what is beneath the text as presented?”, “am I interpreting this text from a position of interference from theory or personal bias?”, “what am I missing?” guided the intuiting process.

Both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the interviews were considered. Interesting phrases were highlighted and any relevant non-verbal considerations were noted. Accepting Steinbock’s (1997) argument that phenomenological descriptions are not about reproducing “mere matters of fact or inner feelings” (Steinbock, 1997, p. 127), these notes were reconsidered in terms of potential underlying thematic phrases or meaning units (DeMares, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). A similar interpretation process was undertaken with video, biographies and autobiographies.

All such emerging themes were assessed to determine any potential connections. Certain initial thematic ideas were grouped and further defined. These second order themes were considered against the original transcripts to ensure the accuracy of interpretations. This whole process was repeated again and again, testing the assumptions, until interpretations seemed to gain some solidity and form. The reviews

were then assessed against the words of those participating in an attempt to expose what might be a more appropriate understanding of the extreme sport experience.

The following paragraphs use quotes to illustrate relevant themes. Where the source is a direct interview participant I have included initials only.

Results and Discussion

Reports indicate that the experience touches something deep within each participant's being that enables an improved personal knowledge and enhanced personal capabilities. Breashears (1999) observed this inner knowledge in himself and others when reflecting on the 'unworldly adventure' (Breashears, 1999, p. 304) of Everest climbing:

> I've always looked to the sky, the snow, the clouds for that light. I've climbed to the highest reaches of the planet in search of it. But when I looked closely into Bruce Herod's eyes, facing his own camera lens, I saw what I might have known all along, and it is this: The risk inherent in climbing such mountains carries its own reward, deep and abiding, because it provides as profound a sense of self-knowledge as anything else on earth. A mountain is perilous, true; but it is also redemptive. Maybe I had dimly understood this as a boy, with no earthly place to call my own, I deliberately chose the iconoclast's rocky path of mountain climbing. But in the moment of pure clarity I realized that ascending Everest had been, for me, both a personal declaration of liberty and a defiant act of escape. Now suddenly, I felt an inexpressible serenity, a full-blooded reaffirmation of life, on Everest's icy ridges (Breashears, 1999, p. 304).

Usher (2000) when documenting the lives of free divers (those who descend to great depth without oxygen) noted that:

> You are in another world, where there is no gravitational force, no colour, no noise … one does not descend in apnea to look around but to look into oneself. It is a long jump into the soul (Usher, 2000, p. 1).

Roberts (1994) concluded: 'No wonder scaling the face of a cliff is a potent act that can penetrate to the very essence of self and help reshape it' (Roberts, 1994, p. 4). Celsi et al. (1993) made comparisons to plastic surgery and concluded that self-

change in this instance was an external, superficial process that an individual hoped would change something inside, whereas the changes involved in extreme sports result from a deep internal process. Essentially the extreme sport experience transforms a participant, though not through working towards an external (social or cultural) perception of identity or towards some constructed perception of an ideal self, but by touching something within.

The connection with a deep self in extreme sports can take the form of realising deeply felt dreams. For example Greenberg (1977) cited the example of a hang-glider who said that hang-gliding was as close as he could get to realising a life-long dream to fly like a bird. Roberts (1994) found that climbers often spoke about connections to something inside that were realised when they began climbing. Wesler (1997) quoted a climber who connected to climbing even before being aware of climbing as an activity; ‘it was something I always knew I’d do … before I knew I would do it, I didn’t even know what form it was’ (Ted cited in Welser, 1997, p. 26). Todhunter (2000) quoted an extreme climber who was adamant that climbing was a calling and that he was put on the earth to climb, ‘fulfilling a greater obligation’ (Todhunter, 2000, p. 172).

Those interviewed for this study also observed that from the first attempt at their chosen activity, it was as if something inside of them knew that the activity was right for them. For example SB, an extreme kayaker, experienced an affinity for water from an early age. However, whilst he tried swimming, surfing, windsurfing and other water-based activities, it was only when he discovered kayaking, and in particular kayaking down waterfalls, that something clicked inside. HS, a B.A.S.E. jumper, reported strong feelings and dreams about flying at an early age and whilst she did not

attempt B.A.S.E. jumping until the age of 33, she had an instant connection to the activity, a connection she did not get with other air sports such as sky-diving or bungee jumping.

For another B.A.S.E. jumper, the connection to early dreams of flying (both day and night dreams) was all-encompassing. The first B.A.S.E. experience was reported as unlike any other experience including sky-diving, and something that was instant and pure.

> It's a place that not many people in society go. Not many people hang twenty feet off a rock wall travelling at two to three hundred kilometres an hour and fly their bodies through the air. The flying thing is a big part of it, realising that childhood dream that felt really pure to me. You can go in an airplane but its man-made whereas that felt a lot more natural to me (TB, B.A.S.E. jumper, mid 30's).

For TR, a surfer of big waves, the experience was also described as natural. The intense experiential nature of extreme sports that involves both body and feelings enables the realisation of deep inner concepts of being, as if the participant is coming home. Once the chosen activity is 'found,' further understandings of self are challenged. A participant initially learns about their nature through participating and extends this learning to develop better emotional and physical capabilities (Houston, 1968). It could be argued, however, that this may be less about learning something new and more connecting to a deep or core inner potential. Roberts (1994) quoted a climber who considered that 'climbing brings you back to a primal place, where values are being created and transformed' (Pilling cited in Roberts, 1994, p. 5).

This connection to an inner core also seems to be related to the experience of being in touch with inner knowledge during the activity (Rogers, 1996). For example, Agiewich (1998) cited a climber who considered that trusting intuition and gut feelings was essential to effective participation. Messner (1998), the first person to

climb Everest solo and without oxygen, described a similar reliance on instinct. Lynn Hill (Olsen, 2001), the extreme climber, stressed the importance of listening to her inner voice, relying on her own intuition and instincts, living in the moment and remaining focused even in team-based expeditions. For Doug Scott (2003), high altitude mountaineering is all about being in touch with and listening to the inner voice, intuition or sixth sense. Tone stated that 'you just have to follow your own line' (Tone cited in Olsen, 2001, p. 185). Furthermore, allowing oneself to be persuaded to undertake activities that did not feel right could result in considerable misfortune. Todhunter (2000) also recognised this point when he wrote that thinking too much and not trusting his feelings negatively affected his climbing.

In an interview conducted for this research, SB, an extreme kayaker, spoke about choosing the route down a waterfall as 'an instant gut feeling' and RT, a big wave surfer observed that participation was dependent on gut feelings about the environment and about his own self-readiness. Soden (2003) quoted a solo climber who observed that ignoring such inner 'feelings' would inevitably result in death.

> I think the fool is the person who ignores what their body is telling them to do. That's the person who ends up dying. If you're going to solo, you have to listen to your body. Listen to your heart, your mind. Your fear is the thing that keeps you alive. So it's a good thing, if you don't ignore it (Mike cited in Soden, 2003, p. 254).

Thus, the consensus seems to be that successful participation in extreme sports necessitates being in touch with, listening to and trusting ones inner knowledge, ones inner experience.

This perception is perhaps in line with the fact that most extreme sports are undertaken solo (Rosenblatt, 1999). Despite assumptions, for some practitioners even the thought of team expeditions being about social bonds is 'an absurd opinion'

(Terray cited in Storry, 2003, p. 136). That is, at an extreme level even when part of a peer expedition, each participant is inevitably ‘alone’ and dependent on their own physical, emotional and cognitive abilities. There is little that team members can do to rescue a waterfall kayaker heading offline half way down a thirty-metre waterfall or to rescue a B.A.S.E. jumper with crossed, entangled lines heading for the cliff. Most often, the participant is required to undertake their own rescue and trust their own decisions. Thus, even when part of a team, each member is required to be fully self-sufficient and confident in their own skills (Olsen, 2001).

An extreme kayaker interviewed for this study voiced the following opinion:

> So many people come to me and say "god I love your lifestyle I'd love to do what you do" and ninety-nine percent of the time I can understand what they mean. But when you sit at the top of a waterfall and the horizon line is the edge of the fall you can't even see the bottom it's so high, all you can see is the clouds in the distance, that's the picture you get, and everyone has just spent the last half an hour walking down the side to sit at the bottom to pick up the pieces if you don't make it, you feel incredibly alone. There are some very strange physical situations as well at the top of the waterfall that make you feel like you are totally alone, apart from the fact that you usually are totally alone because nobody has got any interest in sitting at the top of a fall when they can't see the bottom. You are just the only person left sitting up there. As soon as you say you're ready to go everybody leaves you. Also it's very quiet up there, much quieter than people would expect because the roar of the waterfall is at the bottom and the sound can't really travel up the waterfall and back over to the top (SB, extreme kayaker, late 30’s).

Arnould and Price (1993) found that participants in their study frequently spoke about the power of solitude. Lynn Hill the extreme climber accepted that climbing is a distinctly personal activity where each participant focuses only on the essentials and has to be continually aware of what their body is doing. Kristen Lignell the mountaineer put it this way:

> It’s always a mental exercise. If it’s really cold and snowing hard, you can’t waste time and energy thinking about how miserable you are. You need to focus and mentally walk through what you’re trying to do. You can’t go moaning

> about the fact that there's no one to help you (Lignell cited in Olsen, 2001, p. 104).

RT, a big wave surfer was clear about the experience of being on one's own in such an environment:

> No matter who is with you in the water or watching you on the land, when you paddle into that wave you are on your own but when you fall off or break your board or swim or get held down under water or get into trouble you're on your own. You're totally responsible for yourself and you have to deal with that, so obviously if you can't or don't want to be put in that position you don't do it but it's an incredibly obvious thing that goes with that situation (RT, big wave surfer, late 40's).

A B.A.S.E. jumper interviewed for this research described the experience in the following manner:

> Mahatma Gandhi says that fearlessness is the king of all virtues and we do these things for a number of reasons but one of the most powerful reasons for me is overcoming my own personal fears. That gives you so much more of an insight into your being into your potential and into your capacity (GS, B.A.S.E. jumper, late 40's).

He continued by reflecting on the instinctual fears of falling, separation and dying that, once confronted and transcended as opposed to avoided, allow for feelings of personal power and a type of fearlessness that comes from a better understanding of one's inner being. Essentially for GS the relationship is akin to answering his own personal call to be himself and fulfil his own destiny. Or in other words, to discover what lies within and the realisation of his own potential. Thus, it would seem the extreme sport experience presents one with an amazing gift, the gift of discovering the inner being that had previously been dormant and hidden (Ament, 2001; Niclevicz, 2003; Scott, 2003), an opportunity to become what you already are. GS had spent some time reading and exploring the experience from a scientific and mythological point of view in an attempt to investigate what he considered to be a profound medium that helped him discover his own core self.

> You know you're in this incredibly spectacular environment dealing with really really primal forces, not only primal forces in the environment but primal forces within yourself. We have primitive parts of our being that are connected to primitive parts of every other being, you know, like Jung's collective unconsciousness. We are part of everything that's around us at some deep deep deep unconscious level, connected to it. So to go mountaineering is to reinvigorate and re-establish that connection with a really fundamental core part of your being and yourself. You have to go through 40 days in a desert, that was the metaphor of Jesus going out there, that's what it is all about, to find that core stuff within yourself. You know that's an irony because you really learn so much about yourself when you do any adventure sport. Particularly when you stand on the edge of a cliff knowing that if you don't know yourself by then you might die; you get to know yourself pretty fast (GS, B.A.S.E. jumper, late 40's).

Returning to Breashears:

> The stresses of high-altitude climbing reveal your true character; they unmask who you really are. You no longer have the social graces to hide behind, to play roles. You are the essence of what you are (Breashears, 1999, p. 247).

The idea that extreme sports promote an authentic life does not imply selfishness, but perhaps the total opposite. As Heidegger (1996) showed, it is only through living an authentic self that one can live an authentic relationship with others, a point also noted by Covey (1999) in a less philosophical recognition that a person has to be fully independent before they can be effectively interdependent. Heidegger (1996) extended the point further by suggesting that those living authentic lives encourage others to do the same.

These changes are spoken about as deep positive changes that extend into everyday life and enhance wellbeing. For example, a woman B.A.S.E. jumper put it this way:

> I've been meditating for years and running for years so change was coming slowly you could see progress but I had explosive change in a short period of time so it was a catalyst for explosive growth (HS, B.A.S.E. jumper, early 40's).

Bane (1996) wrote that his first extreme experience left him feeling better than he had ever felt prior to it. The feeling was so powerful that it triggered a total life transformation and a quest to re-explore the experience which would:

> take me places I've only imagined. It will allow me to reach out and touch … something. Something desirable, something mythical (Bane, 1996, p. 5).

The experience transforms life in general. A surfing participant interviewed for this study put it this way:

> That's what I mean when I say 'that buzz' I mean I might die in bed. I'll probably try and remember those things and I'll just go 'yes', I'm ready to go, see you later, because nothing can upset you when you think of those things (TR, Big wave surfer, late 40's).

TR reported that years later this experience provided the strength to get through a divorce he described as the 'worst moments of my whole life' (TR, Big wave surfer late 40's).

> Like I said I think it just makes you a better person makes you more content makes you realize more what life is all about and the pleasures in life (TR, Big wave surfer, late 40's).

So it would seem that participants describe positive life changes emanating from the extreme sport experience. Participation at a level where death is a potential outcome, where the external is clearly more powerful aids learning about the internal and enhances wellness and life. EK a climber in his early seventies summarised the experience as:

> just the feeling of well being because you got into situations where sometimes you were frightened when you got into dangerous positions and the greatest fascination I had from it really was controlling the fear because that's what all the climbing is all about (EK, extreme climber, early 70's)

Summary

Participants experience being connected to a deeper sense of self already known but hidden from view by socio-cultural noise; noise that dictates who each of us 'should' be and how each of us 'should' lead our lives. The extreme sport experience strips away the socio-cultural noise and allows an individual to hear their authentic own-

self. Thus, providing each keeps in contact with their own reality of death, participants can consistently realise their authentic own-self as authentic living. In Heideggerian terms ‘in order to gain everything, one must give up everything’ (Zimmerman, 1986, p. 292). One must be ready to accept and let go of the need to cling to life (Campbell, 1973; Watts, 2003). What participants are describing is an experiential acceptance of death which is a key to unlocking the real self.

This journey is in its essence a realisation of an original innate state of being that Shaner (1985) described as primordial awareness. That is, we are already what we seek; we just need to be released from representational thinking to realise what lies within (Campbell, 1973; Depraz, 2003). Such a release cannot be attained through self-reflection but must be through genuine experiential awareness (Elwood, 1994). For Campbell (1993), such an experience is necessarily brought about by a radical alteration of focus from the external to the internal world.

Arguably, such descriptions are reminiscent of the self referred to by participants as their inner essence or core, the implication being that the extreme sport experience enables a transformation that moves towards a more authentic understanding which in turn enhances life and perceptions of wellness. The extreme sports participant accepts the personal challenge to explore their inner being. The closeness to death facilitates an instant window into each participant’s inner being. It would seem that the extreme sport experience might be the outward expression of a participant’s inner being, an expression which enables a deeper understanding of a participant’s core or authentic self. Thus, extreme sports can be the key both to releasing one’s deeply felt dreams and to becoming more aware of one’s core-self, perhaps akin to the Heideggerian call to realising and living one’s authentic self. By searching out, accepting and honouring

that call, participants gain insights to the deeper personal and interpersonal realms and a key to lifestyle enhancement and wellness.

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